

## Pandemic as Opportunity

by Amanda Weber

“So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all.”

(Galatians 6:10; NRSV)

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven ... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.”

(Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7b)

### Finding Time

**O**ne of the riches of religion is ritual, spelled out for church musicians through liturgical practices, which can so easily spill into other aspects of our work. Too often, this sacredness becomes routine for routine's sake, and we find ourselves piling yet another tradition onto the Mount Everest-sized heap of annual events and expectations. With each passing year, it seems there is less time to learn or try something new because there is more pre-programmed planning based on what “worked” before. I often find myself wondering if we are worshipping nostalgia rather than a living God?

This past spring, the arrival of COVID-19 in the United States interrupted one of our most precious resources—our perception of time. Suddenly, it wasn't possible to hold weekly worship services, meetings, and rehearsals in the same way. Musicians across the country flailed as they attempted to continue producing the same products at the same rate on the same scale, despite their drastically changed contexts and circumstances. Overwhelmed myself, I stepped back to watch and listen. It seemed as though I was observing a room full of toddlers, trying over and over again to fit the

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square block through the circular hole of a shape-sorter box. And for what?

In my own experience as a church musician, I have struggled to stay true to my creative self alongside the constant grind of weekly routines. My best ideas come to me when I'm convening with nature, out for a walk, noodling at the piano with no looming deadline, or connecting with a friend. I often find myself desperately trying to fit these activities into a tight schedule of committee meetings and unwanted screen time, another square block against a circular hole. It's funny to think of how often I use the phrase “finding time,” as if I am in control: “I just need to find time to squeeze that in this week. I think I can find the time.” Well, it has finally happened. Time has shifted. What are we finding?

### Ready, Set, Listen!

In my first full-time job following college, I worked at Luther Place Memorial Church in Washington, D.C., a position that was available through the Lutheran Volunteer Corps. The church called a new pastor in my first few months; the congregation proclaimed they were ready for the next era of justice-work in our nation's capital. We were blessed with the incredible leadership of the Rev. Karen Brau, who came to Luther Place from East Baltimore, where she had engaged in formative work within the Black church community. One of her first moves at Luther Place was the creation of a Visioning Team to help set a pathway for this

congregation that holds a remarkable history yet longs to be forward-looking. I will never forget the first gathering of this Visioning Team. “What are we going to do?” people eagerly asked, ready to work. Design a ten-step process? Draw up a chart? “We are going to spend the next year together in prayer, and we are going to listen,” Pastor Karen replied. “But what are we going to *do*?”

Our American, “time-is-money” culture struggles to see value in sitting still. We view listening as passive rather than productive. Oddly enough, this cultural influence carries into our Christian values and the churn of church-work, though Christianity—like every other faith tradition—carries prominent messages of stillness, Sabbath, and waiting. What would we miss if we sat still? What would we gain?

Like the Visioning Team at Luther Place, musicians in both churches and schools have been eager to look ahead to the future. We recognize there are imperfections in our field related to access, equity, historical conservation, and the struggle to remain relevant in an increasingly globalized and technological world. Every conference I’ve attended offers a plethora of sessions on such topics. Although we are scared, we long for radical transformation; we shout it out into the echo chamber of social media! It will not come with a well-designed ten-step process or a colorful chart. We need to engage in a long and difficult process of listening. Of praying together. Of seeking out the wisdom of those different from ourselves. Of truly hearing one another’s souls.

## Failing to Hear

On May 25, 2020, Americans were growing weary of shelter-in-place directives. Families and friends gathered for physically distanced Memorial Day celebrations. It was a beautiful day here in Minneapolis.

On that same day, George Floyd was murdered. Chaos ensued—first in Minneapolis, then in other large cities across the U.S., with suburban and rural communities following suit, then eventually throughout the world. For Black, Indigenous, and

People of Color (BIPOC) communities, the cry was, “Enough!” For many in the white community, it was an awakening. We have not been traveling this long road together.

The rage of protestors and rioters was seen and heard, though one should not have to be loud in order to be listened to. As Martin Luther King, Jr., once observed, “a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear?”<sup>1</sup> Yet again, we are compelled to listen, to pray, to be still. For those of us who are white and privileged, the work that lies ahead is rooted in repentance, reparation, and reconciliation, even—and especially—in our work as artists and musicians.

## Do Justice

I often think we are confused by the prophet Micah’s exhortation to “do justice” (Micah 6:8; NRSV). When I hear that phrase, I feel fired up! For me, the word “justice” has a powerful, even domineering connotation. As I think more about this, it dawns on me that our understanding of justice likely comes from our familiarity with a human-made criminal justice system and its focus on penalty and punishment. This could not be further from *God’s* vision of justice, a broad and deep concern about fair, equitable, loving, and compassionate relationships in God’s vast creation.<sup>2</sup>

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I have had the opportunity to witness this dichotomy over the past five years in my work as the founder and artistic director of Voices of Hope, an organization that provides choral singing opportunities in Minnesota prisons. Each week, I lead the rehearsal for our choir at the women's correctional facility in Shakopee, MN. Since its founding in 2015, the choir has grown from 15 to nearly 50 singers, with the roster always in flux as some singers are released and others join.

While Voices of Hope is not a religious organization, the space in which we gather is sacred. Most days, that space is punitive, diminishing, and inhuman. But on Sunday afternoons, it transforms. Together, the choir has built a sisterhood that values and empowers each person, just as they are. Fear and insecurity are welcome in that space; we recognize that each singer carries a great deal with them into the room each week. In fact, we sing about it in our opening song, where individuals share their feelings over an improvised vamp, and the whole choir responds, "Know that you are loved."

It's a space that has taught me about flexibility. My higher education degrees in conducting reinforced a *music-centered* pedagogy in which growth comes from the study of music. Yet Voices of Hope has taught me to use a *person-centered* pedagogy, where music is the result, not the framework. The trouble and beauty of such an approach is that people are much less predictable than music. With a music-centered pedagogy, a conductor can choose repertoire, set teaching goals, convey markings in a score, and work toward a quality performance. With a person-centered pedagogy, attending to individual or group needs takes precedence over learning the music. Some weeks, Voices of Hope spends more time talking and crying together than singing. As we near a concert date, I amend my musical plan, cutting or revising pieces we were not able to cover. Our performances aren't perfect, but because we spent our time listening and building mutual respect, they are raw, vulnerable, and electric.

In getting to know the singers in Voices of

Hope, I've learned how *unjust* our justice system truly is. All around me, I've witnessed misguided actions by people aiming to "do" justice by simply patching holes as they continue to appear. It is too late: the wall is tumbling down. Before we hastily attempt to rebuild, let us shift power and listen to the voices that have long been silenced. This is God's vision of justice. It's a table-turning disruption, a Magnificat-sounding cry from marginalized voices, a silencing of those in power. Justice, mercy, and humility are inseparable from one another—not a list of action items, but a trinity of being. God has told us what is good (Micah 6:7).

## Pandemic as Opportunity

It is difficult to embrace a positive message during this tragic time. There is no doubt that COVID-19 is wreaking havoc among our most vulnerable communities and in lasting ways. There is a great deal to mourn, and I do not wish to water down that truth. And yet, God is always speaking to us, always present with us in times of trouble. It is with this assurance that I suggest reframing this pandemic as an *opportunity* for our vocation.

COVID-19 has provided a disruption of our usual routines on such a massive scale that it has, for many, provided time and space to reimagine. Restrictions affecting our most basic tools invite us to consider new methods, to forge new partnerships. The cessation of singing (though I miss it as much as the next person) has made room for quieter voices, for the natural sounds of our planet calling out in pain, and the stifled cries of neighbors literally gasping for air. Can you hear these things, too? If you listen closely, what else do you hear?

Pressing "pause" on our own musical agenda does not put our field at risk of becoming extinct; music as a form of expression is a core part of our humanity and will likely never disappear. It will change and may sound differently than imagined, but it will not cease. Rather, if we let go of our need for control, if we truly listen, this time could allow for the death of tired and exclusionary ways, and a rising up of new life in unexpected places.

